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## A savvy, sought-after survivor of debt

By Irene Sege, Globe Staff | March 6, 2009

[Photo: Essdras M. Suarez / Globe Staff]



Many of the 65 people gathered in the cafeteria of Oracle's Burlington field office to hear Diane Darling talk about networking are unemployed. For two hours, they listen attentively while Darling, a nationally known authority whose two books have been translated into seven languages, advises them on everything from icebreakers to Facebook to relationships.

What her audience does not know is that Darling could offer equally compelling counsel about another problem common during these troubled times: debt. The Federal Reserve reports that almost 6 percent of American credit card holders are behind on their payments, up from less than 4 percent two years ago, and Darling has hard-learned lessons to share.

Just hours before arriving at this meeting of the Boston Product Management Association, Darling took a reporter to the YWCA's Berkeley Residence in the South End, where for four months in 2006 Darling lived in a 9-by-16-foot room furnished with a twin bed, a small desk, and a three-drawer bureau. The shared bathroom was down the hall. It was the sixth of nine moves Darling has made, mostly to rented rooms in houses, since she gave up her one-bedroom apartment near Symphony Hall in 2003 in order to dig herself out of debt accumulated when her previous business failed.

Darling, 49, has been debt-free since April. And this April, after years of keeping that chapter of her life private, she will be honored as a "rising star" by the Center for Women & Enterprise.

Her application for the annual award surprised officials at the center.

"Diane's been established, and she's been around for a while; that's not the norm for who we select," said center president Susan Rittscher

In 1999, Darling launched a business called Lost and Found that helped people recover property left at airports or hotels. She financed it with two Visa cards, two MasterCards, and one American Express card and jokingly dubbed herself "born loser." When it failed in late 2001, Darling owed more than \$50,000. She also had a new idea.

"People were saying, 'Diane, how is it you're getting a meeting with this CEO of a big hotel company?' " Darling recalls. "Out of that, people said, 'Can you teach us networking?'"

Thus began Effective Networking in 2000. A year later, the Wall Street Journal and NBC covered her, and McGraw-Hill contracted a book. In 2003 The Boston Globe listed Darling's "The Networking Survival Guide" as one of the 10 best books for job hunters. She hobnobs with local notables at Boston College's Chief Executives' Club, whose members head companies in the area.

"She works a crowd as well as anyone I've met," says president Peter Rollins.

For all her success, Darling was floundering financially. She negotiated lower interest rates and a \$520-a-month payment plan with her credit card companies. A debt counselor advised her to give up her apartment of 17 years, where her monthly rent and parking ran almost \$2,000. In October 2003 she moved to Arlington to house-sit, paying rent of \$750 a month.

"A lot of people need to know you can make this decision," Darling says. "Life goes on."

So began a peripatetic life. She kept her monthly housing costs under \$1,000. "Did you see the film 'The Pursuit of Happyness'?" she asks. In it, Will Smith plays a salesman who loses everything and lives on the street while he breaks into stock brokering. "I'm, 'My God, this reminds me of my life.' "

Six months after Darling moved to Arlington, the owners decided to sell. Next came a house in Belmont whose owner wanted roommates, but Darling did not realize that the other roommate was the owner's former lover. "They fought like a couple," Darling says. That year, her Saab was almost repossessed.

From March 2005 until March 2006, Darling lived with a boyfriend. When that relationship ended, she rented a small room in a spacious Cambridge house with an indoor pool.

"That lasted about six weeks," Darling says. "I was living with four or five college students who were wonderful, fascinating international people, and I'm sure it was daylight wherever they were calling, but it wasn't daylight in Boston."

After four months at her old beau's place came the YWCA for \$800 a month, breakfast and supper included, although Darling often missed the later meal.

"I'm in a temporary place in the South End," she would tell people who asked where she lived. "Now tell me what's new with you."

She left the Y after slipping in a shower stall made slick by a prior bather's use of baby oil.

"If they find you dead in the Y," Darling says, "this might not be the story you want to leave with in life."

Darling also recalls the Y with pride. While living there, she led workshops for Bank of America in New York, lunched at the Algonquin Club, and earned her highest fee to date, from Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business. "I did what I had to do," she says.

In late 2004, Darling had hired Money Management International. She refused to declare bankruptcy, so this time her debt counselor negotiated with her creditors. She started paying the firm \$270 a month in addition to the \$520 she was already paying on her own. She always paid taxes. "It doesn't take a lot for someone to find out about you," she says. "Ask Tom Daschle."

Darling bounced from the Y to Belmont to Newton. Since December 2007 she has lived in a modest, three-bedroom house in Belmont that she found online and shares with two other middle-age women. Darling arrived with little more than bedroom furniture and boxes, remnants from her Boston apartment, then bought two living-room sofas on Craigslist. The fake bear rugs belong to a roommate.

Darling shops at Costco, consignment stores, and Talbots outlets and occasionally does pet-sitting. Her office, above Barney's in Copley Place, is furnished via Craigslist, apartment leftovers, and freebies. "I was at a speaking engagement for interior designers," she recalls. "I said, 'You have to be willing to ask for what you need. I'll start. I need file cabinets for my new office.' Someone called out, 'They're in my office.' "

Darling keeps a file of ideas - a sunlit bathroom, a simple coatrack - for the condominium in Boston she hopes to buy someday. Her down payment plunged with the stock market, so she must wait before she'll host networking parties in a home of her own.

"The journey's not done. I made it over a big hurdle," Darling says. "I don't know at what point you say you've achieved success, because life is an ongoing situation." ■